Best Practices for 24x7
Public Safety Scheduling:

What Every Leader Should Know

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Executive Summary

Because public safety agencies must operate around the clock, effective scheduling is foundational to operational readiness.

Police, fire, EMS, and dispatch *cannot operate properly without a clear and comprehensive* scheduling strategy because scheduling affects nearly every aspect of an agency's function.

The stress of poorly designed schedules can contribute to employee burnout, reduce job satisfaction, and lead to higher turnover rates in staff, which in turn affects staffing continuity and quality of service. Scheduling problems can also lead to excessive overtime (OT) that stretches budgets. In contrast, when agencies implement well-thought, fair, and transparent scheduling practices that prioritize staff wellness and provide consistent coverage, they set themselves up for success. The agency is able to maintain sufficient staffing levels during peak times and emergencies, which distributes overtime fairly, and improves both employee morale and public trust.

This whitepaper provides public safety leaders with a comprehensive guide to optimizing 24x7 public safety schedules. It explains popular scheduling models, examines key challenges, explores technology solutions, and shares actionable recommendations from real agencies. For leaders anywhere on the spectrum of evaluating new software to refining existing systems, this resource supports informed balanced decisions that safeguard operations and people.

Popular Scheduling Models

This section provides a detailed breakdown of common scheduling models used across public safety agencies. Each model's pros and cons are based on both operational outcomes and research from agencies nationwide.

8-Hour Shifts

The 8-hour shift model divides the 24-hour day into three equal segments: day, swing, and night shifts. This model is one of the oldest and most widely recognized in the workforce due to its simplicity and alignment with standard labor practices. Public safety agencies using this model often rotate personnel between shifts weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, though some assign fixed shifts based on seniority or preference.

Pros of the 8-Hour Shift:

- **Easier integration** of training, meetings, and court appearances during work hours. Personnel on day shifts can attend training sessions or court without significantly disrupting operations or requiring overtime.

- **Shorter shifts** may support concentration and reduce fatigue. Compared to longer shifts, 8-hour shifts minimize the risks of cognitive decline, impaired decision-making, and fatigue-related errors, especially in high-stakes roles like dispatch or emergency response.

- **Increased coverage flexibility.** Supervisors can stagger shift start times slightly to create overlap during peak hours, improving response capabilities.

- **Predictable routines.** Employees often find it easier to maintain consistent sleep patterns and personal routines with 8-hour shifts, especially when assigned to fixed schedules.

Cons of the 8-Hour Shift:

- **Requires three daily transitions, increasing communication handoffs and opportunities for errors.** More shift changes mean more briefings and a greater chance of missed or misunderstood information between incoming and outgoing personnel.

- **Shorter off-duty periods can limit recovery time between shifts.** When working rotating schedules, personnel may experience disrupted sleep cycles, especially when transitioning between night and day shifts.

- **Fewer consecutive days off for staff.** Compared to 10- or 12-hour models, employees working 8-hour shifts typically get fewer consecutive days off.

- **Increased administrative workload.** More shifts per day generally means more time spent managing rosters, scheduling adjustments, and covering absences.

This model is often favored in high-call-volume urban agencies **where staffing needs remain relatively constant throughout the day and night**, and where shorter shifts can help manage stress in fast-paced environments.

10-Hour Shifts

The 10-hour shift model typically divides the day into overlapping shifts (commonly four per day) to provide extended coverage during peak activity periods. For example, shifts might run 6 a.m.–4 p.m., 10 a.m.–8 p.m., 2 p.m.–12 a.m., and 8 p.m.–6 a.m., depending on the agency's call volume patterns. According to the Policing Institute, the 10-hour shift is becoming especially popular with police departments and has [shown reduced overtime needs and improved officer satisfaction.](#)

Pros of the 10-Hour Shift:

- **Improved coverage during peak hours:** Built-in overlap increases staffing during high-demand periods without requiring overtime or on-call personnel.

- **Fewer transitions**. With only two or three daily handoffs, fewer opportunities exist for communication breakdowns.

- **More consecutive days off.** Employees typically work four days on with three days off, supporting better work-life balance and reducing burnout.

Cons of the 10-Hour Shift:

- Longer shifts can contribute to fatigue. 10 hours of high-intensity work can lead to physical and mental fatigue, especially in back-to-back deployments.

- Mid-shift court or training can extend the workday. Personnel required to attend court or training on their day off or before/after a shift may exceed safe working hours, creating overtime or rest violations.

- Harder to implement in smaller departments. Limited staffing may restrict the flexibility needed to stagger shifts effectively.

Many agencies, especially in mid-sized municipalities, favor 10-hour shifts as a way to meet both coverage and employee wellness needs.

12-Hour Shifts

The 12-hour shift model typically divides the day into two shifts: day (e.g., 6 a.m.–6 p.m.) and night (6 p.m.–6 a.m.). Most agencies using this schedule implement a repeating cycle such as 2 days on, 2 days off, 3 days on, 2 days off, etc., to balance workload and time off.

Pros of the 12-Hour Shift:

- **Fewer shifts to manage.** Only two transitions per day simplify scheduling and reduce administrative overhead.

- **Longer rest periods.** Personnel typically work 14 or 15 days per month, giving them extended off-duty time to recover, attend training, and meet personal needs.

- **Greater consistency.** Fixed shifts (day/night) help stabilize sleep patterns and routines.

- **Appealing for some staff.** Many employees prefer having more full days off, especially for family time, secondary employment, or education.

Cons of the 12-Hour Shift:

- **Limited overlap for briefings.** Minimal transition time and overlap between shifts can make it difficult to conduct handovers or communicate effectively.

- **Increased fatigue risk.** Research shows that physical and cognitive performance decline over long shifts, especially during night hours and high-stress calls. This can impact decision-making, safety, and situational awareness.

- **Challenging for older or disabled personnel.** Long shifts can exacerbate chronic health issues and physical fatigue, particularly for field-intensive roles.

- **Higher risk during extended incidents.** When major emergencies or high-call-volume periods occur late in a shift, fatigue may impair response effectiveness and increase risk.

This model is commonly used in EMS and fire services, where 24-hour readiness and fewer transitions are the priority. Some law enforcement agencies also adopt this model for patrol functions—though it's often paired with wellness initiatives and fatigue-mitigation strategies.

Rotating vs. Fixed Schedules

Across all hourly schedule types, agencies have the option to implement rotating for fixed shift scheduling. On a rotating schedule staff will move regularly (weekly, or monthly, for example) between day, swing, and night shifts. On a fixed schedule, staff are assigned to one consistent shift based on agency policy, seniority, or preference.

Rotating Schedules

Pros of a Rotating Schedule:

- **Distributes less desirable shifts more evenly across staff.** Everyone takes turns working nights or weekends, reducing conflict over shift fairness.

- **Can align with operational needs.** Allows agencies to rebalance teams regularly to match changes in workload or staffing.

Cons of a Rotating Schedule:

- **Disrupts circadian rhythms, increasing fatigue and health risks.** Multiple studies have shown that repeatedly adjusting to different sleep-wake cycles impairs physical and mental recovery and can lead to <u>mental illness, disease</u>, and <u>even early death</u>.

- **Makes long-term personal scheduling harder for employees.** Unpredictable schedules make it difficult for staff to plan childcare, schooling, or other obligations.

- **Higher risk of absenteeism**. [Studies show](#) increased call-ins on the first day of shift changes due to sleep debt or disorientation.

Fixed Schedules

Pros of a Fixed Schedule:

- **Promotes strong, stable sleep and life routines.** The consistency of a fixed schedule empowers staff to maximize their sleep quality and protect their long-term health—leading to better performance and well-being.

- **Easier for staff to manage outside commitments.** Predictable hours support better work-life integration.

- **Reduces fatigue associated with shift rotation.** Night shift personnel may adapt better to their schedule over time, improving performance.

Cons of a Fixed Schedule:

- **Less equitable if unpopular shifts are permanent for some staff.** Without rotation, newer employees may be stuck with nights or weekends indefinitely.

- **May reduce flexibility in covering unexpected absences.** Fixed assignments limit cross-coverage and can increase reliance on overtime.

- **Can create siloed teams.** Over time, fixed groups may become isolated from other shifts, reducing collaboration and information flow.

24- & 48-Hour Shifts (Fire Services)

Extended shifts—most commonly 24 hours on duty followed by 48 or 72 hours off—are standard in fire departments across North America. Some departments, particularly in rural areas or those with low call volumes, have even experimented with 48-hour shifts to improve scheduling efficiency and reduce commuting frequency.

Pros of Extended Shifts:

- **Reduces commuting time and frequency.** Firefighters make fewer trips to and from work, saving on costs and increasing personal time.

- **Offers more time-off flexibility.** With two or more full days off following a shift, personnel often pursue side work, education, or family time.

- **Fewer shift transitions.** Extended shifts minimize the number of handoffs, reducing the potential for miscommunication.

- **Well-suited to predictable call volumes.** In lower-volume departments, personnel can rest between calls, making extended shifts more sustainable.

Cons of Extended Shifts:

- **Sustained wakefulness during emergencies increases fatigue and safety risks.** This schedule can create periods without sleep, especially during busy shifts, increasing the risk of operational errors and injuries.

- **Performance can degrade significantly after 16–18 hours.** A [study published in Occupational and Environmental Medicine](#) found that after 17 to 19 hours without sleep, participants exhibited performance levels equivalent to a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.05%. After 28 hours, performance declined further, reaching levels comparable to a BAC of 0.10%

- **Requires strict policies for rest and sleep management during shifts.** Departments must enforce guidelines for in-station sleep, meal breaks, and task rotation to prevent burnout.

- **Not ideal for high-call-volume environments.** Urban departments with frequent runs may find this model unsustainable due to insufficient downtime.

Some agencies have implemented physiological monitoring or fatigue assessment tools to identify early signs of impairment during long shifts.

Kelly Schedule (Fire Hybrid Model)

The Kelly schedule is a variation of the 24-hour shift system designed to reduce total hours worked over a given cycle. A typical Kelly cycle includes a pattern of 24-hour shifts (like every other day for several days) followed by one or more "Kelly days"—mandatory days off designed to avoid overtime and reduce fatigue.

Pros of the Kelly Schedule:

- **Balances extended shifts** with recovery periods
.
- **Reduces total hours worked in a pay cycle compared to traditional 24-on/48-off models.** Often keeps hours under the FLSA 212 threshold, minimizing overtime costs.

- **Well-documented effectiveness.** Widely used and endorsed by fire departments to manage workload and increase staffing predictability.

- **Compatible with collective bargaining agreements.** Often included in union contracts as a preferred method to preserve work-life balance.

Cons of the Kelly Schedule:

- **Complex to manage manually without software.** Requires detailed tracking of rotating work and Kelly days, which can be error-prone without automated systems.

- **May be difficult to adapt for smaller agencies or those with variable staffing demands.** Requires a minimum staffing level to maintain coverage while honoring mandatory Kelly days.

- **Shift coverage gaps possible during absences.** Time off during scheduled Kelly days can leave shortfalls if not backfilled appropriately.

- **Long adaptation period for new hires.** New personnel may find the non-linear schedule confusing or hard to adjust to initially.

Departments often use specialized scheduling software to automate Kelly cycle management and compliance tracking.

Scheduling Tools: Manual vs. Digital

Scheduling for public safety is a complex, high-stakes task, where 24/7 operations, employee needs, union rules, and legal compliance requirements intersect. Choosing the right approach—manual, digital, or hybrid—will directly impact an agency's efficiency, accountability, and cost control.

Digital Scheduling Software

Modern scheduling software is designed to manage complex shift environments with precision and minimal manual input. Purpose-built solutions like PowerTime and Vector Scheduling (formerly CrewSense) are widely adopted in public safety due to their configurability and compliance capabilities. Vector, built by firefighters, focuses on features to expedite callbacks and deploy strike teams, while PowerTime's features were built to serve law enforcement needs related to overtime, court appearances, and more. These systems offer:

- **Simple Payroll Exports** - Collects employee records of time worked automatically for a one-click export to use in payroll.

- **Real-Time Staffing Visibility.** Helps maintain operational readiness with immediate insight into current and projected staffing.

- **Alerts for Staffing Gaps or Overtime.** During the approval process, notif supervisors when coverage falls below minimum thresholds or when employees approach OT limits.

- **Employee Self-Service Portals.** Empowers staff to submit time-off requests, bid on shifts, and process trades.

- **Detailed Audit Logs.** Captures all schedule changes, approvals, and overrides to support legal compliance and internal review processes.

These systems also support fatigue risk management, a growing concern in public safety, by enforcing rest periods and monitoring cumulative work hours.

Manual/Paper-Based Scheduling

Despite known limitations, some agencies still rely on manual methods such as whiteboards, spreadsheets, and printed rosters. While familiar and low-cost, these tools introduce significant risks, such as:

- **Error-prone** data entry.
- **Version control** issues.
- **Limited accessibility** and outdated information.
- **Labor-intensive** administration.
- **Weak** documentation.

Agencies using paper-based scheduling are more vulnerable to disputes and inefficiencies, and they face more threats to compliance.

Hybrid Scheduling Approaches

Many agencies adopt hybrid models, automating core scheduling functions while managing exceptions manually. This method provides flexibility but comes with trade-offs, like data fragmentation between inconsistent records and limited visibility into processes without centralized reporting.

Hybrid scheduling may be suitable as a transitional strategy, but overall, using this strategy often undermines the benefits of automation.

Return on Investment (ROI) for Digital Scheduling Software

Agencies that implement digital scheduling solutions consistently report:
- **Lower overtime** costs
- **Faster scheduling** cycles
- **Fewer** compliance violations
- **Increased transparency**
- **Reduced grievances**

Return on investment is often realized within the first year, driven by reduced administrative labor, fewer scheduling errors, reduced overtime, and better overall cost control.

Compliance & Legal Factors

Effective 24x7 public safety scheduling must also meet a range of legal, regulatory, and contractual obligations. Failure to comply can expose agencies to issues including lawsuits and reputational damage—but a well-informed approach to scheduling can help protect both the organization and its personnel. Keep these key considerations in mind.

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

The FLSA governs wage and hour laws, including minimum wage, overtime eligibility, and compensable time. Regarding the FLSA, public safety agencies must be particularly aware of:

- **Overtime thresholds**
- **On-call time and shift overlaps**
- **Training time**

Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

Under the FMLA, agencies must accommodate eligible employees with job-protected leave for qualifying medical or family events. To do this, your scheduling system must be able to track and cover FMLA eligibility and usage.

Union Contracts and Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs)

Labor agreements often define scheduling policies, such as:

- **Shift length and rotations**
- **Overtime rules and seniority-based scheduling**
- **Mandatory rest periods**
- **Limits on forced overtime**

Agencies must make sure that any schedule changes are negotiated and implemented in accordance with relevant CBAs.

State and Local Labor Laws

State-specific regulations may add additional protections, and agencies operating in those jurisdictions must stay compliant with those laws as well. These can include items like:

- **Mandatory meal and rest breaks**
- **Limits on consecutive working hours**
- **Minimum staffing levels for specific roles**

Best Practices for Compliance

- **Centralize scheduling records** to ensure consistent documentation and ease-of-audit access.

- **Automate scheduling rule enforcement** through scheduling software to prevent accidental violations.

- **Train supervisors and schedulers** on key legal and contractual requirements.

- **Conduct annual reviews** of scheduling practices in partnership with HR and legal counsel.

Proactive attention to compliance around scheduling reduces legal risk and reinforces the integrity of the agency's operations.

Lessons from the Field

Public safety agencies nationwide have shared valuable lessons from their efforts to improve 24x7 scheduling. While each agency operates under unique constraints, several themes have emerged across police, fire, EMS, and dispatch services.

Transition from rotating to fixed shifts

This transition consistently stabilizes routine and reduces fatigue. Agencies noted that staff on fixed schedules experienced better sleep quality and more predictable home life, which lowered absenteeism and improved performance at work.

Align schedules with peak call times

By adjusting shift start times or using overlapping schedules, agencies were better able to deploy staff effectively during high-demand hours, reducing response delays and minimizing the need for reactive overtime.

Empower staff with self-service scheduling tools

This added flexibility improves employee engagement. When personnel can request time off, swap shifts, or bid on schedules through digital platforms, administrative workload decreases and employee satisfaction increases.

Automate core scheduling functions

Digital scheduling software helps enforce compliance and reduce human error. Agencies that moved away from manual methods found improved labor agreement adherence, fewer scheduling conflicts, and stronger documentation for audits or grievances.

Prioritize wellness in schedule design

Agencies that built in adequate rest periods and avoided rotating shifts reported greater resilience, improved retention, and a stronger organizational culture.

These field-tested practices emphasize the value of stability, transparency, and technology in building effective 24x7 schedules that support both agency readiness and employee wellbeing.

Actionable Recommendations

To improve 24x7 scheduling, agency leadership should:

1. **Analyze demand data.** Match staffing levels with actual call volumes and workload trends, including overtime data.

2. **Prioritize wellness.** Design schedules with rest, days off, and employee fatigue in mind. Avoid rotating shifts.

3. **Pilot changes first.** Test new models with a subset of staff to evaluate impacts before scaling to everyone.

4. **Involve stakeholders.** Gather feedback from union reps, supervisors, and frontline staff.

5. **Coordinate court & training obligations.** Integrate external requirements into schedules to avoid conflicts.

6. **Audit annually.** Review schedules and policies to stay compliant.

Additional Resources

Explore more:

- [How Does Public Safety Scheduling Software Handle Shift Bids?](#)
- [How Do Scheduling Templates Work? What are they?](#)
- [Best Police Shift Schedule Examples for Optimal Team Efficiency](#)

PowerTime was developed alongside police and EMS agencies to meet public safety's unique scheduling needs. A system built for your operations saves time and allows you to focus on your mission.

[Learn More](#)